

# DEQ: Funds to improve systems

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The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality announced Wednesday that 55 cities, communities and facilities will receive a combined \$43 million in federal economic stimulus money.

The money will go toward a variety of improvements to wastewater treatment facilities and systems with 20 percent of the money going to green projects, said Bijan Sharafkhani, administrator for business and community outreach for DEQ.

The \$43 million is a small fraction of the \$1.8 billion in requests the department received from 250 applicants, he said.

Of those applications, about \$1 billion was identified as ready to go to construction or contract in the one-year deadline outlined by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the stimulus bill.

Projects the money will pay for include the installation of new residential meters and the replacement of some inefficient commercial meters in Baker, the only project listed in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Baker's plan is one of seven "green" projects focusing on water conservation and energy efficiency, Sharafkhani said.

He explained that without a water meter, people pay a fixed rate for water service, regardless of how much they use.

With a meter, people pay for what they use and become more water-conscious, Sharafkhani said.

That saves groundwater resources, water treatment costs and transmission costs of bringing water from the plants to homes or businesses, he said.

Typically, the timeline of going from identifying projects to construction can be anywhere from six months to two years, Sharafkhani said.

However, the stimulus bill specifies that projects must be under contract or construction by Feb. 17, 2010, one year after the bill passed.

"In this case, because of the deadline set in the act, we're really shortening the whole process," he said.

Because of that shorter deadline, applicants are being given a series of deadlines, Sharafkhani said.

The deadlines include:

- June 12: Applicants need to submit documentation their project is ready for construction.
- Aug. 1: applicants must send project plans to DEQ.
- Nov. 1: DEQ wants to be able to sign contracts for the loan agreements for the funding.  
The loans for these projects will then be forgiven.

In addition, typically up to 4 percent of the money is allowed to be used for administration of the program, Sharafkhani said. However, DEQ decided to forgo taking that amount which left about \$1.5 million to go back to wastewater projects, he said.